1 Lucky president, 3 unlucky pirates

by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Jimmy Carter sent the Delta Force to rescue hostages, and their helicopters crashed. Ronald Reagan sent peacekeepers to Lebanon, and 241 of them died when their barracks were blown up. Bill Clinton sent the Army Rangers to hunt down Somalia warlords, and the result was "Black Hawk Down." George W. Bush invaded Iraq, and we're still there.

Barack Obama, on the other hand, sent the Navy to the Somali coast to rescue a hero from pirates and came out smelling like a rose. As we've noted before, for all his other gifts, President Obama also appears to have that first quality that Napoleon looked for in his commanders: He is lucky.

Lucky in that his first military crisis involved a handful of ragtag pirates who (a) stupidly attacked a rare American-flagged vessel; (b) abandoned ship for a lifeboat, which lifeboat (c) ran out of gas causing them to (d) allow the USS Bainbridge to tie a line to them, which line was (e) shortened to a sniper-friendly 30 meters.

Lucky in that one of the pirates put a gun at the hostage's back and triggered the rules of engagement for use of deadly force. Lucky that three crack SEAL snipers simultaneously executed three remarkable shots at 30 meters from the fantail of a destroyer to a bobbing lifeboat in choppy seas and took down the pirates.

Lucky, even, in that it all occurred on the slow Easter weekend news cycle, and that the merchant captain who was rescued, Richard Phillips of the Maersk Alabama, is a handsome, bearded sea dog who had remarkable courage of his own. The line for book and TV deals starts here.

Now, alas, comes the hard part. There are an estimated 1,000 Somali pirates working the coasts off that tragic, lawless nation, splitting their booty (an estimated $125 million last year alone) with various warlords and corrupt officials. They're still holding a dozen ships and 200 hostages for ransom.

Piracy also is a large and continuing problem in Australian and Indonesian waters, but in Somalia it is truly a growth industry. Maybe the only growth industry. Everyone agrees something should be done about it. Nobody agrees on what should be done or who should do it.

It's not really an American problem most of the time. The pirates who commandeered the Maersk Alabama last Wednesday were very stupid. More than 40,000 merchant ships sail the world's oceans. Fewer than 100 are American-registered or "flagged." Most ships fly "flags of convenience," paying taxes and fees in countries like Panama or Liberia, where laws are lax.

The sea is so vast and regulations are so chaotic â€” nonexistent in some areas â€” that piracy is a low-risk proposition. Cargo may be worth tens of millions of dollars. Shipping companies â€” some of which are owned by different kinds of pirates â€” are more than willing to pay a couple of million to ransom their crews and cargo.

They are loath to arm their crews or put deck guns aboard their vessels. To many of them, piracy is like bunker fuel: part of the cost of doing business. Until they're required to get serious, the problem will continue.

This is one of those vexing international problems that the international community is so poor at solving, but that's where the job lies. Piracy is yet another form of international terrorism, requiring a coalition of the willing. So far, most of the willing are missing on the high seas.

Reprinted From The St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Distributed By Creators Syndicate Inc.

1 Lucky president, 3 unlucky pirates by The St. Louis Post-Dispatch